

Chapter 8.1

Paradigm Shift Required for ICT4D

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter I argue for a shift of paradigm in the field of ICT4D. Since the inception of aid for development in the late 1940s with the introduction of the Marshall Plan, development has been dominated by emphasis on economic development, while development of other human characteristics have been neglected. The standard argument in contemporary ICT4D literature, based on the so-called Washington Consensus, is that economic “upliftment will result in social “upliftment”. It is assumed that economics is the primary cause for social change. I challenge this assumption, and propose that it is instead individual “upliftment” that influences social change that might (or might not) lead to economic change. The more recent Post-Washington Consensus introduced a shift toward socio-economics, by addressing poverty, but is still based on a particular ideological brand of economics. There is a need to move away from such an economically biased approach to development, and from measuring success with economic metrics such as GDP. ICT4D projects are typically deployed within this economic paradigm. The alternative approach suggested here is to deploy ICT4D projects against a social and cognitive paradigm in which social networking and psychological enrichment would take priority over economic development. Within such a paradigm, the principle of least effort would be used for measuring success. This proposed new paradigm is a techno-utilitarian approach. In this regard Development Informatics could pave the way for designing new kinds of ICT systems that are socially relevant to remote communities (whether geographically or socially remote) by making life easier for individuals. It is envisaged that economic development would follow individual and social development. The focus on developing an individual by exposing such an individual to scientific knowledge, will enable that individual to make better choices, which will lead to changing that individual and his or her environment. As the individual changes, the surrounding society changes (which is not the same as progressivism). Social change may lead to a change in the components of society, one of which is economics. ICT is regarded to be a tool to make life easier, and focuses on the enlightenment of an individual within the social context in which such an individual lives, by facilitating the possible development of cognitive and psychological abilities.

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DIVIDES

There are different views of the role of ICT for development. Optimists regard ICTs as the solution to all problems, pessimists argue ICTs increase the divide, and realists see communities adapting new technologies (Polikanov & Abramova, 2003). Heeks (2008) presents a fair summary of current thinking in ICT4D. He provides an overview of how thinking about ICT4D has changed over the past few decades and suggests some approaches to address the failures of the past. In this context, according to him, an interdisciplinary approach between computer science, information science and development studies is required. Heeks points the road away from the failures of the past, of what he calls the first generation (version 1) of ICT4D, towards a reframing of many of the issues into an ICT4D 2.0 framework. This is admirable, and social activists would be happy if this could be achieved. However, there are still several assumptions not mentioned by Heeks, that we, as critical theorists, need to address. Not only the assumptions need to be reconsidered, but the paradigm underlying the programs implementing ICT4D.

A reader might object to so much emphasis on economic theory in this chapter. My reply would be that the standard justification for deploying ICT systems in developing regions is predominantly economic. The terms “development”, “upliftment”, “betterment”, “bridging the divide” and others as used in the field have strong undertones of economic ideology, as will be shown in this chapter. A second reason for addressing economics is that the governments of by far the majority of poor developing regions do not have a large enough tax-based income to provide basic services such as water, energy and transport networks, and definitely not for ICT networks. They are dependent on foreign aid. However, despite the roughly USD2.3 trillion spent over the past half a century on aid (see e.g. Easterly, 2006), only the fool hardy could still believe that aid is successful.

Divides between social groups are typically measured with reference to economics. But the matter of divisions is much more complex. There are at least three types of digital divide that should be discussed in the context of development. Firstly, the operational divide concerns availability of ICT and access to ICT systems. This requires an infrastructure for ICT to operate, and devices for access. Secondly, the cultural divide refers to a social dimension where some groups may not have either technological or social access to dominant social networks (Castells, 2004a). Thirdly, political divides exclude some groups or individuals of communities. Castells points to Mulgan who observed that networks are also created to gain position of power, which of course leads to the dominance of some groups and consequently exclusion of others (Castells, 2004a: 23).

Ostensibly ICT4D is about overcoming the digital divide operationally. At least, that is what is often claimed in the media. However, ICT4D could also empower communities to overcome the other forms of divide. Equal access offers the ability to bypass political power structures. And whereas in the physical world dominant social structures are easy to observe, in the virtual world such barriers are less pronounced.

Making networks available operationally is not necessarily a neutral goal, as the justification is often to enable communities to join the trend toward globalization, which has a political agenda—the power-play of neo-colonialism in the form of globalization, corporatism and western culture. The donor group typically decides what is important for the receiving group, and that is politics. Among donors I include donor agencies, governments, NGO’s, organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, UN, philanthropists and even social activists. The receivers are communities regarded as being on the wrong side of some divide in the context of ICT4D, typically the digital divide, which most often refers to remote communities, whether geographical or social, as well as to the so-called developing world, or the

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